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ABSTRACT

A description is given of the structure and operation of 29 intermediate administrative units which provide consulting, advisory, administrative, or statistical services to local school districts in Pennsylvania. The basic services rendered by the units are in the areas of: (1) curriculum development and instructional improvement; (2) management; (3) continuing professional education; (4) pupil personnel; (5) instructional materials; (6) state and federal agency liaison; (7) educational planning; (8) special education; and (9) non-public services. (JD)

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN PENNSYLVANIA: AN INTERMEDIATE UNIT PERSPECTIVE

by Dr. John DeFlaminis

I would like to focus on three topics. First, I would like to briefly tell you what intermediate units are, because regional service organizations are not alike, and in fact, may not even be similar. Second, I will discuss the strengths of Pennsylvania's school improvement efforts as they are linked to programs in the past that have been featured at AEL. Finally, I will discuss school improvement needs, because I think the needs tie more directly to this program than the strengths do.

There are 29 intermediate units in Pennsylvania. Originally mandated to provide seven basic services, they now provide nine. Those services are:

- curriculum development and institutional improvement,
- management,
- continuing professional education,
- pupil personnel,
- instructional materials,
- state and federal agency liaison,
- educational planning,
- special education, and
- non-public services.

Our intermediate unit serves 3,300 square miles and our school districts range in size from 700 to 7,000 pupils. One of those districts is one of the seven smallest in Pennsylvania. Another is the largest geographic unit in the state and is larger than some of our smaller states in the country. It is 990 square miles in size and is one single district.

We are most unusual in that we can offer courses for credit which can be used for teacher certification. In effect, we do compete with universities in offering teacher courses which can be used for permanent certification. However, we enjoy good relations with

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Pennsylvania State University which is in our service region. As I talk about the strengths and technical assistance partnerships, I think that we are especially lucky to have that resource. The technical assistance element has worked very well in our region, because we have been able to establish close relationships with our institutions of higher education.

There are some major strengths that are most important from a local school district perspective and which, in my opinion, have been effective as we look across districts.

What has not worked has occurred because there has not been a clear targeting of resources to needs. There is competition in some parts of our state, but not at the level of organization which identifies divisions of labor that could make something like a technical assistance partnership work. In our region all of us believe that each of us is not enough to serve the needs of the region. We do try to identify who can do the best job in a particular area of need. The resources represent a reasonable division of labor, a targeting of resources from the institution that can serve the particular needs of a school district.

The strengths in the School Improvement Program involve some understanding of educational history in Pennsylvania. The process was initiated in part to curtail the competency testing movement. There seems to have been a movement in the Legislature prior to our current secretary taking office which suggested that competency testing was coming. Since we have a very adequate and exemplary testing program in Educational Quality Assessment, there were field people, as well as the state legislators, who wanted to avoid competency testing. I think the school improvement process helped to avoid that movement.

The school improvement process does have a long history in Pennsylvania. Even though things tend to start with new secretaries of education, three or four outstanding programs were funded by the Federal Government seven or eight years ago. One of them was the Pennsylvania School Improvement process. So antecedents of the current school improvement program were, in fact, in place for a long time.

Our districts knew about long-range planning, but the long-range planning process this time tended to streamline and target some things that have worked quite well in the past. The ongoing five year cycle is reasonable in that this is enough time for long-range goals to be achieved, as well as to look at shorter range objectives, and then begin the whole cycle again to reconsider where the district might want to be at a certain point in the future.

Community involvement has been built into the plan. Naturally, if it is built into the plan, it tends to be emphasized. It has been emphasized in terms of parents looking at school improvement as a better way to understand the direction of their school districts. Also, it has been emphasized because of the parental involvement in community activities like needs assessments and the process of identifying particular learning directions in a district. Community involvement and the needs assessment process tend to be targeted to quality goal areas, i.e., to those goals where parents perceive the district should be spending time or giving attention.

The school community has been involved, and that is a strength. In many cases the program has been very participative. That in itself in some of our small districts was a new experience. It has led to better and more cooperative relationships as the district moves ahead to implement a plan.

For example, two of Pennsylvania's 12 Goals of Quality Education are not surprising. One is communication skills; the other is mathematics. But we have other quality goals which support the basics, like self-esteem. In our rural areas, self-esteem tends to be approached with almost equal emphasis to basic skills. Parents do perceive that there is a need for things like expectancy.

The emphasis of Pennsylvania's School Improvement Program has been on written curriculum. Curriculum Alignment, which Roger Scott discussed, mentions three components: assessment, objectives, and instruction. I can say that our school improvement process has focused on two.

As I indicated, we have an exemplary statewide testing program (Educational Quality Assessment [EQA]) which is not a competency testing program, but provides item analyses on quality goal areas. Teachers and administrators can look very carefully at the elements of their curriculum where their children are not achieving. Not only can they identify quality goal areas where their students are not achieving, but they can actually target the item clusters, the categories of knowledge, or the areas in that particular quality goal where achievement is dropping. They can also use the remainder of their testing program as another aspect of the tested curriculum.

The long-range plan has tended to direct school districts toward writing curriculum. That would be both one of its strengths and weaknesses. Because of the focus on the 12 goals, and because the needs assessment tended to be very closely related to the statewide testing program, districts lean towards writing curriculum as a major direction for the improvement of student achievement.

The third element which Roger mentioned has not been dealt with in a systematic way in Pennsylvania; that is, the instructional component. Barak Rosenshine's bottom line is "You get what you teach for." I would modify that for needs assessment--you get what you assess for. In our case, our assessment leads us to written curriculum. Susan Everson discussed a process which she did not call needs assessment, but was a source of gathering data in the first part of CEMREL's school improvement process. Her focus was not written curriculum, but rather key aspects of instruction. I think this improvement process offers a very important piece which Pennsylania not only needs, but is missing. Because our state is large, it does not mean that many of the things which we have seen are not in place somewhere. The problem is that those things are not systematically in place, and they are systematically addressed by few districts.

Some examples where instructional improvement programs are in place do exist in our state. Time on task has been promoted by Research for Better Schools in many of the urban and suburban districts. A major site for Chicago Mastery Learning is in Philadelphia. Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) has been available in Pennsylvania for many years. This year training was offered statewide.

Madeline Hunter has consulted with the City of Pittsburgh; and the superintendent, a former R & D director himself, has used Madeline Hunter's framework in determining the direction of the Pittsburgh schools. Interestingly, the direction has a primary focus on instruction. He explained in a recent meeting that he was more interested in instruction, because he felt that results will be seen much faster than with writing curriculum. He was not putting down the long-range planning process in Pennsylvania, but his experience dictated the need to focus on instructional issues.

Jane Stallings has held an information awareness in our intermediate unit, but we have no active sights yet. As I have indicated, Fenwick English has made a major impact on our state with a process similar to curriculum alignment. There is much overlap. Fenwick English has worked with many of the intermediate units to assist with curriculum mapping. When considering curriculum alignment (or curriculum management), we have made progress.

There are other needs in our state. Seeing the whole picture in planning has to be one of the greatest needs. Ken Bowman mentioned the link between programs and services and management; I will emphasize staff development.

Sometimes a plan for programs and services is developed only to find that a staff development component is necessary but cannot be built in at an adequate level to address the program planned. Every program is staff development intensive, and yet staff development is a little emphasized part of the long-range plan. It tends to be considered after programs and services and management which draw most of the attention and resources in a district. Unfortunately, staff development may be the most critical section, and yet it is seldom integrated effectively into the plan which a district might develop. In fact, I have seen districts develop plans only to find later that funding cuts eliminated the staff development resources and key amounts of time that were needed to implement the plans, even before the plans were submitted for approval. That is not a phenomenon that is unique to Pennsylvania. I think we have all experienced cutbacks and find that staff development tends to be a very sensitive area and one that is easily cut.

I think a lot of the programs that we have seen through AEL have focused on some of the factors and the key issues in implementation. It has been very helpful for us. I can say that it has helped me to anticipate some of the consequences which might be coming.

There is another major area of need which I would like to underscore. We give a lot of attention to planning, and give less attention to implementation and evaluation. I am very concerned about that in my role as a technical assistor. Our roles in helping districts in the planning stages requires minimal time involvement. I am more concerned about the time requirement later to provide implementation and evaluation assistance, which I see as far more formidable. I am gravely concerned about the degree to which not only our districts but the technical assistors, ourselves included, understand the implementation issues which are there.

The last thing that I would emphasize has to do with technical assistance; that is, the efficient use of technical assistors. Sometimes we are brought in to assist, but we are not used appropriately. Occasionally we are brought in to assist when it is too late. Things have already happened, and the problem is already there, and it is even more of a problem than we can mediate. We may be brought in to assist after the planning has taken place when in fact we might have contributed to a much better plan had our involvement occurred earlier.

I have lived in a lot of states, and I find the quality of education in Pennsylvania to be extraordinary. If I have tended to emphasize some needs, it is because Ken Bowman started by talking about questions. There is an old quote that says, "A person's learning usually passes through three stages. In the beginning the person learns the right answers. In the second stage the person learns the right questions. In the third and final stage, the person learns which questions are worth asking." I guess we are at the stage where we are just beginning to learn the right questions, and I see that as a step in the right direction.

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